Who The Magickian is (in the Sinister Tarot of Christos Beest)

Introduction

The illustration of the Magickian Atu (see fig.1) in the Sinister Tarot is visually complex, where more than at first meets the eye. I wish to analyze some of the elements present in this tarot Atu, notably i) the effect that the presence of both the girl and the woman have on the viewer and ii) who I believe the girl, the woman, as well as the blackbird, to be.

Being within the painting

It is fairly evident to me, as I wish to show with some context by briefly describing the ONA practice of pathworking, for which the Sinister Tarot Atu were conceived and which the artist likely had in mind when designing the symbolism of its illustrations, that the latter were designed to be interacted with through the imagination. In the core ONA text NAOS, it is explained that when doing pathworking (a form of esoteric meditation) with the major arcana, one is to imagine oneself within the illustration, interacting with its characters, objects, and with the landscape. To quote from NAOS:

> ... (for example, for the Moon: 18 Moon). Imagine yourself as part of the landscape depicted
> ...Imagine yourself in the desert, walking along the path toward the crumbling towers. You walk between the towers and see the scorpions on the half-buried book. Then you might decide to pick up the book and see what it contains, or peer into the towers where the hunched, dark, shapes are hiding or continue long the path toward the mountains. You might do all these things – the choice is yours.[1]

I believe, without much doubt, that Mr. Beest intended for his illustrations, though they are not faithful to the descriptions of those presented in NAOS (which may be good, given as Mr. Beests's illustrations are truly unique, id test, truly different from tarot illustrations inspired the Marseilles Tarot and onwards), were painted for this purpose.

She calls to you

While such things as what one first notices in a painting will sometimes depend on the receptivity different from viewer to viewer, there are nevertheless certain universally-applicable visual elements that an artist may make use of, either wittingly or unkowingly, in order to ensnare a viewer's attention. Here Beest makes use of what William Mortensen calls the 'dominant mass'[2] – that is the girl, or younger woman, standing in the front, greeting the viewer. The 'dominant mass' used here makes it unlikely for the viewer to find the painting banal and without effect, regardless of how insensitive they may actually be to art. Compounding this effect is the striking contrast between the girl's white dress and the otherwise dark colur palette used in the rest of the painting.

One's attention first falls on the girl, then, the woman standing in the doorway to the house, and finally the blackbird. The latter also stands out by a visual contrast, this time of black against white, and due to what Mortensen calls 'the diagonal'.[3]

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1 West, Thorold, *NAOS, a Practical Guide to Modern Magick*
2 Mortensen, William, *The Command to Look*
3 Ibid.

Fig.1 Atu 1 The Magickian

The Mona Lisa effect

To me, it always felt like the girl was, much like the Mona Lisa herself, giving you the same gaze from all directions in which you, the viewer, look at the painting. This is what makes the Mona Lisa so haunting, and Beest too, has captured it, with the Magickian. No matter what angle you look from, the girl looks back. A viewer, immersed in the interactive practice of pathworking, as described above, experiences a most unsettling effect...

The poetess as a blackbird

Richard Moult, the identity behind the 'Christos Beest', has said that he is an admirer of the Shropshire born poetess Mary Webb. He has said that he believes she sometimes appears to him in the countryside in the form of a blackbird.[4] If you study the wings of the bird in the illustration, they are likely those of a blackbird, although a corvid is possible.

I believe the girl, the woman, and blackbird to be three different representations of Lady Webb. There is even a similarity between the dresses both are wearing and the dresses worn by Lady Webb in many photos. While Moult did not have access to a search engine at the time of painting (likely before the public internet), he may have had seen pictures, or a picture, of Webb (see fig.2).

4 https://rabbitsandrazors.wordpress.com/2010/11/16/mary-webb-and-richard-moult-a-sinister-union/

Fig.2 A Google search-found picture of Mary Webb

I am reminded of Edward Munch’s painting The Woman in Three Stages (fig. 3).

Here, in Munch’s painting, the symbol is given away in the title and the three ages of the woman are clearly depicted, without any *occult* symbolism. In the Magickian Atu, the symbolism of old age/death is hidden in the form of the blackbird, which would not be possible to decipher without knowledge of Moult’s beliefs about this species of bird. And without being able to decipher the symbolism of the bird representing the third phase of life, neither the woman nor girl make sense as symbols of this cycle . It is much more likely to believe the woman and the girl are simply mother and daughter, or are somehow related, or know each other, and are standing there at the same time. Without the blackbird, the surrealism of Moult is lost.

Beest has employed this same symbolism in another card of his Sinister Tarot: The Maiden of Pentacles (see fig. 4). Here, However, the artist depicts not three ages but three different postures in which stands (or crouches) (what is in appearance), the same woman.

Fig. 3 *The Woman in Three Stages*, Edvard Munch

Fig.4 The Maiden of Pentacles

Concluding thoughts

Note that my interpretation is simply that – it is not an official comment made by Richard Moult, nor should it equal one.

There are four hypothesis in this article:

i) the painting was created with the intent of the viewer to imagine themselves in the painting
ii) the gaze of the girl is perceived, by the viewer, as looking at the latter from all directions
iii) the girl, woman, and bird all represent Mary Webb
iv) the girl, the woman, and the bird all respresent different phases of the life of Mary Webb

Of these, i is the more probable than improbable, ii is demonstrable/falsifiable through the experience of the viewer, iii and iv have speculative value and iv is contingent upon iii being true (I define probability to constitute the likelyhood of an interpretation being intended, or hidden, by the artist himself, and although a numerical scale for measuring such probability is not possible here it is assumed that the likelyhood of a hypothesis being true is either > or < than 50%).

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